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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000132

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: REDSHIRTS, YELLOWSHIRTS DOWNPLAY RECONCILIATION CALL

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

¶1. (SBU) According to both anti-government redshirt and anti-Thaksin yellowshirt groups based in Chiang Mai, the joint private sector-academic community's call for political reconciliation to facilitate economic recovery issued in August was "misdirected" and does not carry any weight. While both sides expressed a willingness to sit down and work through their differences, neither expect the joint statement to have any real effect on Chiang Mai's economy. For their part, redshirt leaders see the statement as one-sided, blaming them for Thailand's ills, while the yellowshirts wonder why the statement named them, arguing they have done nothing to cause trouble for local communities in Chiang Mai.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: While admirable, the joint efforts of the private sector and respected academics are unlikely to put a stop to redshirt and yellowshirt antagonism in Chiang Mai. Even if they could, we doubt that an economic revival would take root as a result. Though groups on both sides have caused local disturbances, blame for the downturn in northern Thailand's tourism sector rests more with the global recession (and influenza worries) than clashes. Nonetheless, representatives of one redshirt and one yellowshirt group confirmed to us they will hold a low-profile meeting the week of September 21 to see if they can find some common ground. End Summary and Comment.

Private Sector, Academics Call for Compromise

¶3. (U) At an August 11 press conference, the Presidents of seven local universities and representatives from several business groups -- including the Federation of Thai Industries, the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce, Chiang Mai Tourism Business Association, and the Thai Hotel Association -- issued a public statement calling on all political groups to put their differences aside to "build unity for economic confidence for Chiang Mai". The statement asserts that activities of political groups have had a negative impact on investment in the province, as well as the tourism and export sectors. It affirms support for the peaceful expression of political views, repudiates violence, calls for law and order to be respected and law enforcement to be carried out equitably, and appeals for political groups not to obstruct the government's efforts to provide services to the people.

¶4. (SBU) Payap University President Dr. Pradit Takerngrangarit, who signed the statement on behalf of the

seven university presidents, told us that the initial draft of the statement read like an anti-redshirt diatribe, and he had impressed upon his colleagues that for the statement to be effective, it needed to be more balanced. The final version names neither redshirt nor yellowshirt groups, and in our estimation, is objective. (We will e-mail the statement to Embassy Bangkok and EAP/MLS.) Nevertheless, groups on both sides have criticized the text, claiming that it singles them out, blaming them for Chiang Mai's economic woes.

15. (SBU) Private sector contacts spearheading the effort asserted that they were spurred on by a 50-70 percent drop in Chiang Mai's tourism-related business since the April 2009 redshirt riots in Bangkok. They therefore reached out to the presidents of seven local universities, who expressed support for their reconciliatory efforts. The aim of the press conference, they said, was to get both sides to keep their political differences from negatively impacting Chiang Mai's economy. The opposition redshirts' disruption of the late August visits to Chiang Mai of the Finance and Commerce Ministers was, in their view, the last straw. While skeptical about the likely impact of their efforts, these contacts hope that the website they launched shortly after the press conference (<http://www.peacechiangmai.com>) will help raise public awareness of the political conflict's impact on the economy.

Redshirts React

16. (SBU) The leader of the Rak Thaksin (Love Thaksin) redshirt group reacted harshly, noting that Chiang Mai's economic difficulties were a function of the global economic crisis rather than redshirt-spawned instability. If investment and tourism in Thailand are down overall, he asserted, the decline

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will affect Chiang Mai too. He also claimed that several of the contributors to the statement are known to be sympathetic to the anti-Thaksin yellowshirts.

17. (SBU) For his part, the editor of the pro-redshirt "Red Front" magazine questioned the timing of the statement, wondering why Chiang Mai businesses were feeling the pinch now, but failed to speak up during the November 2007 seizures of Bangkok's two airports by the yellowshirt People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or the redshirt riots in Bangkok and surrounding areas in April 2009. Meanwhile, the grassroots Confederation for Democracy highlighted the need for Chiang Mai law enforcement authorities to crack down with equanimity on both sides, noting that while action was taken against the region's pro-redshirt community radio stations in the wake of the April 2009 riots, none was taken against the area's pro-yellowshirt community radio station for broadcasts in which it incited violence.

Yellowshirts Somewhat Less Displeased

18. (SBU) Three Chiang Mai figures associated with the pro-yellowshirt People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) also shared their views with us. The leader of the Campaign for Popular Democracy said he did not see what blame the PAD bore for the economic downturn, aside from the broadcasts of one community radio station claiming to represent the PAD that have on occasion incited violence. Our contact characterized the operator of that station as "an opportunist," saying he is not a true PAD supporter.

19. (SBU) A pro-PAD journalist viewed the reconciliation effort as ineffective, arguing that the academics and private sector representatives wanted merely to be seen as taking some action to arrest the region's economic slide. He pointed out that the heads of several organizations that signed the public statement

failed to appear at the press conference, perhaps out of fear of retribution by redshirt groups. Though he supports tolerance of different opinions, he opined that pro-reconciliation stickers and the Peace Chiang Mai website were insufficient to get the message across. He suggested that the radio stations of participating universities use airtime to actively promote political reconciliation, and that universities allow overtly political meetings to be held on their campuses as a sign of commitment to the effort. (Note: Payap's Dr. Pradit was non-committal when we asked if his group would attempt to broker a reconciliation meeting between Chiang Mai's redshirts and yellowshirts.)

¶10. (SBU) Another local PAD figure, who is also a businessman, and who lays blame for the downturn in Chiang Mai's tourism squarely on the redshirts, opined that the statement will not have a strong impact because it does not specify who needs to reconcile with whom. He asserted that what was really needed was greater pressure on local law enforcement authorities to take decisive action against Chiang Mai's redshirts. He also highlighted the need to restrict political content on community radio stations, so as to prevent them from being used to foment political disunity. (Note: Northern groups on both sides of the spectrum have used their community radio stations to incite violence.)

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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